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Board director offers vision to improve county work force

By Michael Rappaport
Staff Writer

If you're looking for a job in San Bernardino County, the odds are Barbara Halsey can help you. If you're an employer or an entrepreneur, she can definitely help. Halsey is the director of the county's Workforce Investment Board, which has a mission of putting potential employers and employees together and helping both.

In a rapidly growing county,

Halsey is a busy person. She sat down to answer six questions from The Sun just before flying off for two days of meetings in Sacramento.

Question: What role does the Workforce Investment Board play in the economic life of San Bernardino County?

Answer: The board is at the heart of programs that meet the needs of growing industries in the county by providing employment

direction and career advice to county residents. Its role is to identify work-force issues and develop and implement solutions for business and individuals.

These solutions strengthen local business and improve the quality of life for residents through employment and lead to the long-term economic growth of the county.

The SBC-WIB is comprised of private and public members that

are appointed by and serve under the direction of the county Board of Supervisors. We examine the work-force needs of businesses that are located in San Bernardino County or thinking about locating here. We also develop programs that will build the skills of the local work force.

In addition to looking at what's happening now, we are constantly monitoring what the needs of business will be in the future. Our

job is to be thinking about how to prepare people for the jobs that will be here tomorrow.

For example, the SBC-WIB has taken the lead in developing creative strategies to increase the number of nursing graduates and retain them in the work force, which is a challenge in California. In collaboration with Loma Linda University Children's Hospital and local community colleges, we

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developed an initiative that has increased nurse retention by 20 percent.

Another role is making people aware of the career opportunities that exist in San Bernardino County. Through our research, we have learned of specific sectors that are growing. We have developed in-depth career ladder studies, which will be published this year to give residents a better understanding of the career opportunities available in high-growth sectors.

Q. If there's one thing people don't know about what your group does that you think they should know, what would that be?

A. Since we are a private, business-led organization, we are able to maintain the interests of businesses at the heart of our work. These leaders, because they run businesses, understand first-hand how critical work-force issues are. They help us hold that purview as the guiding factor of all we do.

Another key aspect is the diversity of projects and programs that the SBC-WIB funds and develops. Our programs include everything from community-based youth programs to the Superintendent of Schools' Alliance for Education, specific customized training programs with business and employment resource centers where anyone can go and receive information on the job market.

In these initiatives, the board is the intermediary, negotiator, and problem-solver among the parties involved, which include business, education, government, labor and community-based organizations. All of these parties are brought together to help contribute to solutions to work force needs in the short and long term.

We are very concerned about the health of local businesses. We fund programs and services through our economic development arm that assists with business retention and expansion.

Q. How has San Bernardino County changed over the last 10-15 years as an employment market?

A. San Bernardino County added 4.9 jobs for each new unit of housing from 1994 to 2001. In recent years, the Inland Empire region has led the state in job growth. Higher-paying sectors in the region will add jobs in 2006 as professional, scientific and management operations increase their presence here.

San Bernardino County has transitioned from offering mostly blue-collar jobs to white-collar careers. It was considered a bedroom and blue-collar community 15 years ago. Now San Bernardino County has evolved as an economic engine. People now want to build lives here rather than just live here. The job market has changed. More professionals have moved here, and we are seeing an increase in demand for those skilled professionals. There has been growth in retail, construction, continued growth in manufacturing (in which the jobs have become more high-tech and more automated) and increasing opportunities in health care and goods movement. The economic base of the county is becoming more diverse.

The average age in San Bernardino County is decreasing. The median age in the county is currently 27.6. As of the 2000 census, the average age was 30.6.

Because housing in San Bernardino County is affordable (San Bernardino County's median housing price in April was \$360,000), more young families are moving here. This has led to a growth in the younger work force. With a younger work force, our challenge is getting them connected with the type of job opportunities that will provide them with the income they need to support the quality of life they seek.

Q. How do you expect it to change as an employment market over the next 10-15 years?

A. In San Bernardino County, you can enter into the work force at almost any level. We are seeing growth in retail, warehousing and logistics. We will see greater growth in what are perceived as true white collar, management and professional jobs, as well as the sectors related to science and technology.

We will see an increase in those jobs that require advanced degrees and increased demand for individuals with degrees. We are also seeing increased de-

mand for vocational and technical-trades-related skill sets.

Having a trained and skilled work force is the key element to the success of San Bernardino County's economy. Without the work-force talent, companies cannot grow here. As economic-development agencies are working to attract new business and assist businesses here with growth, the board has to be keenly aware of what is happening in the economy so it can effectively train the work force.

Q. What is the most satisfying thing about the work you do?

A. The work of the SBC-WIB can directly impact the quality of life our residents experience. It helps businesses grow and helps entrepreneurs make their dreams come true. It also helps people find careers that offer growth, satisfaction and a better life.

The kind of work performed by a Workforce Investment Board changes all the time. It is necessary to always be ahead of the trends in the economy. It is critical to be forward-thinking, aware of current opportunities and anticipating future challenges.

Q. What is the area where the county needs to improve the most in helping its residents with their employment needs?

A. Our county leadership, especially at the Board of Supervisors level, has been exemplary in their support of the work-force-development board. Their support is critical to the economic development and growth of the county.

The Board of Supervisors was visionary when it set the economic development and work force development strategies. They are leading us in the right direction, and we look forward to the quality of life their vision will offer current and future residents of the county.

We need to see improvement at the federal level. Developing a world-class work force requires adequate investment. Funding levels for programs that support developing the work force have seen staggering decreases over the past five years. Without priority investments to work-force training, we risk losing our competitive advantage.



Thomas R. Cordova/Staff photographer

Barbara Halsey, director of San Bernardino County's Workforce Investment Board, helps bring employers and employees together and advocates for continued growth and development in the county.